

Supporting the autonomy of poor target groups

Suggestions for work in projects

Information document for MISEREOR's partner organisations

At MISEREOR we promote projects that support poor and disadvantaged people in Africa, Asia and Latin America in becoming autonomous.

In this context we need to ask how we and how you – our partner organisation – define the “*autonomy of poor target group*”. How is this strengthening of autonomy reflected in the projects? We would like to use this information document to dialogue with you, so that we can compare notes and exchange ideas on the autonomy of poor target groups.

We believe it is important to share ideas on the following points:

1. What we mean by autonomy (i. e. how we understand the term at MISEREOR and how you understand it within your organisation),
2. Strategies which build on that,
3. Appropriate methods for project work.
4. Demands on project staff that result from this.

In the present information document we have put together effective strategies and methods based on the experiences and lessons learned by our partner organisations (organisations that are legal holders of projects). We analysed projects on three continents and discussed these with partner organisations. The organisations themselves assessed which methods they consider to be transferable.

The examples included are designed to prompt further reflection and inspiration.

1. What we mean by autonomy

‘Autonomy’ means: self-reliance or independence in the sense of an *ability to move forward without external support*. In relation to the work of development cooperation projects, this means that:

Target groups can continue processes supported by projects self-reliantly.

- ▶ From a certain point on they do not (or they no longer) require intensive external support.
- ▶ Once the project has been completed they are able to **act on the basis of their own intrinsic motivation and continue the initiatives they have developed on their own.**
- ▶ The groups are able to shape their **lives** as individuals and communities and **take their own decisions.**
- ▶ They **articulate** their **needs** und **make these a part** of the relevant **development processes at the local policy-making and community levels.**

When working with our partners for development, we at MISEREOR aim to foster the growing personal and economic self-reliance, self-organisation and participation of target groups in their local development processes.

This includes for instance food sovereignty, economic empowerment and improved life circumstances, as well as access to and control over public services. We aim to boost the capacity to act of families and grassroots organisations, and enable them to participate (politically) in their local development processes.

Target groups need to become independent and to let go the organisations providing them with temporary support. Phasing out should therefore be an integral component of the entire project/programme implementation phase.

‘Autonomy’ is difficult to measure. Indicators of autonomy may include:

- ▶ the self-reliant continuation of activities developed in a project,
- ▶ the ability to utilise government programmes or enter into dialogue with government agencies,
- ▶ the development of new projects, regardless of whether these are supported or not.

The Diocese of Maroua-Mokolo in Cameroon uses four categories to determine the degree of autonomy:

- 3** A certain level of autonomy; groups that self-organise very well. They can locate resources themselves and engage with cooperation partners.
- 2** There are groups that take joint action. Individuals are organised in groups.
- 1** Some activities and meetings do take place on a one-off basis.
- 0** Visible activities have not yet begun.

2. Promising strategies

“If a programme is truly addressing community desire and expectation and widens scope in planning, execution and evaluation and does not just treat them as recipients of the programme it can bring out people’s confidence and potentiality, which is important for self-development.”

(Barcik, Report, Reporting Period July 2013 to June 2014)

An organisation needs clear and plausible strategic orientation for interacting with a given target group. Projects that involve MISEREOR then fit into this strategy.

Strategies that successfully support the autonomy of poor target groups are based on the following assumption: people possess the capability to actively shape their lives and to a certain degree also their life setting.

Here are four promising strategies for strengthening autonomy:

2.1 Build on potential

Change and qualitative improvement are supported most effectively by building on capacities that already exist. In the long term, organisations that are the legal holders of projects reduce dependency by identifying and building on local potential and local resources.

They provide support in the form of expertise that is not available locally, and promote self-organisation, cooperation and exchange. This support should revolve around the needs of communities and families.

An organisation that is a legal holder of a project should ask itself:

Are we familiar with the potential and needs of our target group?

Have we integrated these systemically into the project design?

2.2 Ensure sustainability

The finite nature of an intervention should be taken account of and discussed during the planning process. Projects should establish structures such that the target group can continue to use them self-reliantly later on.

When beginning their intervention, the legal holder of the project should plan and specify the date of its withdrawal. Appropriate conditions for this withdrawal should be established beforehand or during the course of the project.

A legal holder should ask itself the following questions:

How long and how intensively will we be supporting the target group?

Have we communicated this clearly to the target group?

What will remain once the project has been completed?

Will the target group be enabled to maintain this in all respects?

2.3 Pursue in process learning

It is important to maintain a flexible, process-based approach and to think in the long term. The organisation should see itself as a 'learning organisation'. It should be responsive to the development of its target groups, learn from and with them, and transfer lessons learned to other areas of its work.

It is important that everyone involved in the work is committed, and willing to change and to learn. This should be supported through comprehensive induction and regular training measures for staff during their period of employment.

Direct sharing and exchange between organisations that are legal holders of projects (e.g. in the context of people-led development) has proved to be a successful strategy.

2.4 Decide how to deal with other actors**This means making a conscious choice between the following options:**

- a) working in regions where no other development organisations are operating, **or**
- b) working in parallel with other organisations, which involves a risk that the target group may face conflicting demands, **or**
- c) cooperating with other organisations on a harmonised and coordinated basis, or even developing joint programmes.

3. Examples of transferrable methods

No strategy can be transferred on a one-to-one basis. Nevertheless:

Methods that have been successfully applied in one project can prompt ideas for other projects.

1. Successful legal holders begin together with the target groups, with an open mind about the results. They focus on the needs and potential analysis conducted with and by the people affected.
2. They use participatory methods to define the project.
3. They prompt monitoring by the target groups and regular self-evaluation within the grass-roots groups.

The CDD plans for a period of 3 years. The planning phase itself lasts several months, and takes place before the project is launched. The planning process is begun by the target groups. They analyse their current situation and what they have done over the last three years. They think about what they would like to move forward over the next three years. In a first phase this is performed by the grass-roots group using worksheets. The second phase involves jointly considering what form the joint work might take, and defining priorities. Based on this preliminary work a project plan is developed and objectives are defined. During the implementation phase the target groups themselves assume responsibility for implementing the activities. They also define the areas in which they require support from the CDD. Evaluation takes the form of self-evaluation.

(Diocese of Maroua-Mokolo, Cameroon)

We will now present three methodological approaches in detail.

These are designed to provide helpful ideas and inspiration for your own project work.

3.1 Group visits, community exchange programmes or farmer-to-farmer visits

Successful legal holders have found that people and groups learn best directly from each other and by sharing with each other. This is why they support group visits such as community exchange programmes or farmer-to-farmer visits.

These visits are made regularly. They are organised such that one group can meet another in pursuit of a specific learning goal.

The aims of group visits are:

1. Sharing experiences and lessons learned

- ▶ Obtain first-hand information on obstacles and difficulties, as well as solutions,
- ▶ learn from others who have already succeeded in coping with similar problems,
- ▶ transfer (positive) lessons learned,
- ▶ groups are able to underpin their own self-assessments by comparing their experiences with those of other groups,
- ▶ discuss content, e.g. cultivation issues, climate change adaptation measures, forest use rights, methods of knowledge transfer to the next generation.

2. Getting to know other approaches

- ▶ Share lessons learned in specific areas and get to know (agricultural) methods and technologies,
- ▶ adopt and disseminate innovations,
- ▶ get to know how other groups form and develop structures self-reliantly.

3. Networking

- ▶ Begin cooperating, e.g. for marketing purposes,
- ▶ strengthen relations between participating groups, and across projects and communities,
- ▶ network with other groups/movements to strengthen agendas, and to plan and implement joint activities,
- ▶ establish what capacities are available in other groups so that these can be utilised when required rather than obtaining external expertise,
- ▶ hold joint festivals for exchanging seed and reviving indigenous culture.

These visits can be made during any phase of the project, and after the project has been completed. After some time groups often organise reciprocal visits themselves.

3.2 Monitoring by target groups themselves, self-evaluation

The respondents indicated that participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation played an important role in their projects. The projects studied included several examples of target groups participating in M&E activities or performing monitoring themselves.

The methodological options were:

- ▶ self-evaluations performed within grass-roots groups, family groups,
- ▶ self-monitoring by individual households with daily recording of data,
- ▶ regular planning and evaluation meetings (e.g. every two months), in some cases involving all stakeholders,
- ▶ six-monthly monitoring, annual full evaluations,
- ▶ monitoring of project activities by grass-roots groups,
- ▶ established PME systems or systemic instruments for monitoring change,
- ▶ external evaluations of specific areas.

In many cases objectives and indicators were derived systematically from lessons learned in the previous projects and/or household surveys.

It is important for the autonomy of poor target groups and for the sustainability of projects that the indicators are defined by the people involved. Several organisations have prepared forms for self-evaluation. These can also be used in cooperation with households.

At an evaluation the following questions are asked:

- ▶ Where are we now?
- ▶ What have we achieved so far?
- ▶ What can we still improve?
- ▶ What will help us make further improvements?

One major challenge lies in developing new methods and further developing existing ones for (self-)monitoring. Another lies in the sharing of methodologies.

3.3 Community savings and credit programmes

Small scale farmers, poor families and female-headed households often have no access to traditional/conventional finance delivered by banks. To meet the need for small and micro loans, some projects support the establishment of sustainable self-financing instruments.

Solidarity funds and community savings and credit programmes provide financial services for low-income families and groups. By so doing, they promote local development.

We should take the following key principles for supporting financial autonomy into consideration:

- ▶ a community-based approach,
- ▶ mobilisation of local resources,
- ▶ economic and social sustainability,
- ▶ promotion of individual and collective development,
- ▶ democratic and transparent management.

The micro-finance programmes self-managed by communities themselves combine – within a group of manageable size – savings activities and the reallocation of endogenous financial resources.

These are used to serve development and entrepreneurial activities, as well as other social needs, of the community concerned. Developing savings activities enables households to rely on their own resources for making small purchases and investments. Small loans support entrepreneurial activities such as the cultivation and marketing of vegetables.

Savings and credit programmes aim to reach the poorest individuals and support the autonomy and responsibility of their members. Experience has shown that micro-finance systems help mobilise communities beyond the lifespan of projects.

This means they support the sustainability of projects. Furthermore, developing a culture of saving may create access to public micro-finance institutions.

4. Possible roles of project staff and demands placed on them

“We help people help themselves ... we are at the farmers’ side but they are at the core of all their actions – from definition to evaluation ... We try not to lead but to walk side by side with the people.”

(Excerpt from an interview with INADES, Africa)

Supporting target groups on their path to autonomy, and enabling partner organisations to transition into organisations providing support and facilitation, places certain new demands on project staff. They should:

- ▶ understand the needs and priorities of the community,
- ▶ listen patiently, and maintain a courteous and respectful manner,
- ▶ be willing to change their attitudes, i. e. gradually stop ‘providing solutions’ and begin facilitating the development of appropriate solutions with and by the actors concerned,
- ▶ be personally committed, and possess professional and communicative skills,
- ▶ live in the communities concerned during phases of intensive support,
- ▶ be willing to learn continuously and work in a multidisciplinary team.

To properly perform this role and the tasks associated with it, project staff members are trained in participatory methods. This training complements their specialist expertise.

The content of the training includes facilitation, participatory planning instruments (e.g. PRA), monitoring, the roles and self-understanding of the project staff. This self-understanding of project staff as facilitators and members of a team is further reinforced through self-evaluation.

5. Using the present information document – Dialogue on autonomy

In our information document we have shown how legal holders can successfully support poor and disadvantaged people in Africa, Asia and Latin America on their path to autonomy.

We would like to continue discussing this topic with you in greater depth, and invite you to join us in thinking about how we can proceed with project work in the future.

Key questions in this context might be:

- ▶ What do people mean by the term ‘autonomy’ in your organisation?
How is this strengthening of autonomy reflected in projects?
- ▶ How do target groups see their own role, and how do they see the role of the organisations advising them?
- ▶ What strategies do your organisation as the legal holder of a project or projects pursue in order to proactively foster autonomy?
- ▶ In your opinion and in the opinion of your target group, what are the appropriate methods for project work?
- ▶ Are there strategies for dealing with other government programmes or activities of non-governmental actors?
- ▶ What demands are placed on project staff? How is the team composed (skills, disciplines, attitudes)? How does learning take place within your organisation?
- ▶ Which other legal holders of projects do you liaise with?
Where could these relationships be further developed?

We hope you will find some of the ideas contained in this information document helpful in your project work. We at MISEREOR look forward to continuing dialogue with you.

Publications on related issues:

Published in Spanish, “*Al andar se hace camino*” is a set of methodological guidelines to support autonomously managed processes in the agro-ecological sector:

www.lacosmopolitana.com/documentos/al_andar.pdf

Published in English, “*Strengthening people-led development*” presents lessons learned by MISEREOR’s partners with PLDP in Asia:

www.misereor.org/fileadmin/redaktion/MISEREOR_Strengthening_people-led_development.pdf

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